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Report of the Office of Internal Oversight Services on the usefulness of the pilot thematic evaluation

Summary

As requested by the Committee for Programme and Coordination at its forty-third session, the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) is reporting on the usefulness of its pilot thematic evaluation entitled "Linkages between headquarters and field activities: a review of best practices for poverty eradication in the framework of the Millennium Declaration" (E/AC.51/2005/2), which was presented to the Committee at its forty-fifth session in 2005.

Feedback on the pilot thematic evaluation was positive, with both United Nations stakeholders and Member States rating its overall quality as excellent or good. High ratings were also given to the clarity and relevance of the report's findings, the adequacy of the evaluation methodology and the overall structure of the report. Stakeholders and Member States also saw the report as useful. Suggestions for improving the pilot thematic evaluation include stronger follow-up and accountability mechanisms, more targeted analyses and greater reference to the wider United Nations environment, including a discussion of the significance of coordination between Member States and United Nations entities. Regarding follow-up to report recommendations, OIOS noted that steps were being taken to enhance information sharing between field, regional and headquarters offices, to better inform country teams about the work of non-resident agencies, strengthen linkages between field offices and regional commissions and better inform country offices about the work of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

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Lessons learned from the pilot thematic evaluation can be used to improve future reports. OIOS applied several of those lessons to its current thematic evaluation of knowledge management networks in pursuit of the goals of the Millennium Declaration. Among the most significant lessons learned were the need to scope and focus the evaluation appropriately, given resource and time constraints, and the importance of crafting recommendations that best address cross-cutting systemic issues and vulnerabilities. Informed by those lessons, in its current thematic evaluation OIOS focused on the most strategic and relevant issues, consulted with key stakeholders and tapped into relevant organizational initiatives and developed partnerships with coordinating bodies, such as the Chief Executives Board for Coordination. Interest in both the current evaluation and future thematic evaluations was particularly high.

Noting the positive feedback on the pilot thematic evaluation and its value as a cross-cutting and Organization-wide assessment of a timely, strategic and relevant topic, OIOS is of the view that thematic evaluations should continue to be conducted on a regular basis in the future.

I. Introduction

1. At its forty-third session, the Committee for Programme and Coordination decided to defer to its forty-fourth session the selection of a topic for thematic evaluation, for submission to the Committee at its forty-fifth session and subsequently to be reviewed for its usefulness at its forty-sixth session.[1] In 2004, the Committee selected the theme: "Linkages between headquarters and field activities: a review of best practices for poverty eradication in the framework of the Millennium Declaration".[2] In 2005, the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) presented its report on that topic (E/AC.51/2005/2) at the forty-fifth session of the Committee. The present report fulfils the request by the Committee to report back on the usefulness of the pilot thematic evaluation.

II. Methodology

2. Three methods were utilized for the present review: (a) a user feedback survey of the primary United Nations stakeholders of the pilot thematic evaluation;[3] (b) a user feedback survey of Committee delegates to the forty-fifth session;[4] and (c) systematic follow-up by OIOS on the evaluation recommendations. Feedback on the report was also obtained through a Secretariat-wide survey of programme managers conducted for the 2006 OIOS biennial report on strengthening the role of evaluation findings in programme design, delivery and policy directives. The review was conducted less than one year after the publication of the pilot thematic evaluation report; a longer time period would be required to conclusively determine the impact of the evaluation. Therefore, OIOS determined the usefulness of the pilot thematic evaluation by assessing user feedback, reviewing follow-up to recommendations and determining lessons learned that could be used to strengthen future thematic evaluation reports.

III. Background

3. The Regulations and Rules Governing Programme Planning, the Programme Aspects of the Budget, the Monitoring of Implementation and the Methods of Evaluation mandate OIOS to conduct evaluations to determine as systematically as possible the relevance, efficiency, effectiveness and impact of the Organization's activities in relation to their objectives.[5] Historically, OIOS met that mandate by conducting in-depth evaluations of Secretariat programmes. However, in 2002,

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[1] *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-eighth Session, Supplement No. 16* (A/58/16), para. 16.

[2] Ibid., *Fifty-ninth Session, Supplement No. 16* (A/59/16), para. 399.

[3] A user feedback survey was sent to the secretariat of the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination, the United Nations Development Group Office, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, the Regional Commissions New York Office, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Children's Fund and a United Nations Country Team that OIOS visited during the pilot evaluation. Responses were received from seven individuals representing six different entities. These respondents will be referred to as "stakeholders" or "stakeholder respondents" in the present report.

[4] Seven missions replied to the survey.

[5] ST/SGB/2000/8, regulation 7.1.

OIOS proposed adding thematic evaluations to its programme of work. The evaluations focus on a single, cross-cutting topic or activity and assess the cumulative effects of multiple programmes sharing common goals. They also assess coordination and cooperation between programmes and take an organizational perspective on issues and topics of strategic relevance and importance. OIOS noted that thematic evaluations were therefore complementary to programme-specific in-depth evaluations by providing a cross-cutting assessment of the performance and impact of the Organization. At the forty-fourth session of the Committee in 2004, OIOS presented a report on the further development of topics for a pilot thematic evaluation, which proposed three different themes.[6] The Committee noted that all three were important and had merit and ultimately selected the theme of linkages between headquarters and field activities: a review of best practices for poverty eradication in the framework of the Millennium Declaration.

IV. Findings

A. Feedback

Introduction of report to the Committee for Programme and Coordination

4. When the pilot thematic evaluation report was introduced to the Committee at its fifty-fifth session, it was welcomed as useful and timely and a good example of how a thematic approach to evaluation could be of value. Several delegations expressed concern, however, that the report did not adequately address the issue of coordination between Member States and United Nations agencies.[7] With some provisions, the Committee endorsed all findings and recommendations contained in the report.

Overall quality

5. Both United Nations stakeholders and Member States rated the pilot thematic evaluation report highly. Five of seven stakeholder respondents rated the overall quality of the report as good, while two rated it as excellent. All seven Member States responding to the survey also rated the overall quality of the report as good. Positive feedback on the report was also reported by programme managers responding to the OIOS survey on strengthening the role of evaluation findings in programme design, delivery and policy directives.

6. Specific comments on the report illustrated its value added. The report was described by respondents as an excellent review of the realities of coordination in this area and a very good and rare institutional analysis of United Nations system-wide coherence. Others stated that the report was well-written, touched on relevant issues and was meaningful.

Evaluation findings and recommendations

7. Feedback on the findings and recommendations contained in the report was also positive. First, the clarity of both the findings and recommendations were rated

[6] E/AC.51/2004/2, para. 18.

[7] In response to that concern, OIOS acknowledged the importance of such coordination but clarified that such an assessment was beyond the scope of the evaluation.

as excellent by most stakeholder respondents (with a minority of respondents rating them as good), while nearly all rated the relevance of findings and recommendations as excellent or good.[8] The adequacy of the evaluation methodology and the overall report structure similarly received high marks. From the perspective of Member States, the recommendations were seen as clear, relevant and practical.

8. OIOS noted that several comments received on the report pertained to general follow-up on its recommendations, but that the issues raised were not unique to the report alone. A few stakeholder respondents, while not disagreeing with the appropriateness and relevance of the recommendations, stated that without a more structured and clear process for follow-up, their impact would be limited. One stakeholder stated that what was needed were follow-up mechanisms with specific timelines and responsible parties, as well as benchmark assessments of progress made; another suggested an enhanced accountability framework for managers. Another stakeholder stated that the real challenge was that in the United Nations there were no adequate mechanisms to follow up on the myriad recommendations made by different bodies, many of which make eminent sense, but for which there was limited capacity for implementation.

Usefulness of evaluation

9. Regarding the utility of the report, six of seven stakeholders rated it as very useful or useful (one rated it as somewhat useful), while all seven Member States agreed that the report was useful to them. No stakeholders and only one Member State stated that additional information was needed in the report in order to address the mandate of its topic.[9] However, a few stakeholders did offer ways in which the report could have been even more useful, such as greater follow-up and further exploration of certain key issues, in particular those raised in the triennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system.[10]

Suggestions for improvements

10. Stakeholders and Member States offered various suggestions for improving the pilot thematic evaluation report. They included introducing the report in senior management forums and working with entities to develop action plans for implementing the recommendations, using the report for dialogue with senior decision makers, providing more detailed and targeted analyses, expanding the discussion to include the wider environment in which the United Nations works and referring more to the role played by national Governments, including coordination between country teams and Governments, in poverty eradication.

Follow-up on the evaluation

11. Regarding follow-up to the recommendations contained in the report, OIOS will pursue standard procedure by following up with relevant clients every six months and reporting back to the Committee with a triennial review in 2008. While it must be noted that it is still quite early to assess implementation of the

[8] One stakeholder respondent rated the relevance of major findings as fair.

[9] The additional information requested related to the issue of coordination between United Nations entities and national Governments.

[10] A/59/85-E/2004/68.

recommendations, in December 2005 and January 2006 OIOS did follow up with the relevant United Nations entities to determine the status of the evaluation recommendations.[11]

12. The following steps were being taken to address the recommendations of the pilot thematic evaluation report:

(a) With regard to enhancing information-sharing (recommendation 2), the United Nations Development Group formed a knowledge management working group that was planning a pilot project on HIV/AIDS, and the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) was taking the lead on developing a system-wide knowledge-sharing strategy. In addition, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was working on expanding its human rights policy network to the United Nations system and helping Secretariat programmes to develop their own knowledge networks. Further, the UNDP poverty network has become part of a wider community of practice in order to better integrate it into the United Nations system;

(b) With regard to better informing country offices about the work of Secretariat entities with little or no country presence (recommendation 3a), the Group established an inter-agency working group on non-resident agencies, which would formulate recommendations for better engaging those agencies in the work of country teams and ensuring improved access by country teams to the expertise of agencies without a field presence. The Group was carrying out those tasks in close collaboration with the High-level Committee on Programmes of CEB, with a final report to be submitted by the working group by January 2006;

(c) Regarding further strengthening the resident coordinator system as a linkage tool (recommendation 9), the following initiatives were ongoing: the inter-agency working group on resident coordinator issues had prepared and generally agreed to an authority and accountability framework for resident coordinators; a special task force report on resident coordinator assessment, selection, support and training had been submitted to CEB; and joint training for resident coordinators and agency representatives would be piloted in October 2006;

(d) Regarding the better exchange of information between the regional commissions and country offices (recommendation 4), efforts were being made to incorporate the analytical and technical expertise of regional commissions at the country level though greater participation in country-level processes and frameworks, the provision of technical assistance and regional coordination meetings and knowledge-sharing forums. Also, the Regional Commission New York Office was co-chairing the above-mentioned working group on non-resident agencies;

(e) Concerning better informing country offices about the work of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (recommendation 3b), the Department would further promote its work through local launches of its poverty-related publications and alert bulletins.

[11] The follow-up was conducted as part of the regular tracking of recommendations undertaken by OIOS on all of its reports on a biannual basis. Not all of the entities to whom the recommendations were addressed responded to a minimum of two OIOS requests for status updates.

B. Lessons learned

13. As discussed in the conference room paper on proposals for future thematic evaluations by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (E/AC.51/2005/CRP.1), several lessons had been learned from the pilot thematic evaluation. A significant challenge had been to scope and focus the evaluation appropriately, given the resources and time frame with which it was conducted. The lessons learned included:

(a) Determining whether the evaluation would incorporate a broader, system-wide perspective, especially if warranted by the topic, and carrying it out within the limits of the OIOS mandate;

(b) Employing a variety of evaluation methods;

(c) Undertaking a stakeholder analysis to identify key stakeholders;

(d) Engaging in a consultative process with those stakeholders;

(e) Establishing an advisory group to provide guidance and feedback throughout the evaluation process;

(f) Developing recommendations that addressed systemic weaknesses and fed into ongoing organizational initiatives.

14. OIOS noted that the cross-cutting and broad focus of thematic evaluations presented both the greatest opportunity and the greatest challenge in conducting the reviews. Determining the types of recommendations that could best address cross-cutting systemic issues and vulnerabilities, as well as deciding on the most appropriate entity to whom to address these recommendations, were significant challenges. OIOS recognized the importance of developing clients for thematic evaluations that would be in the best position to respond to and implement the systemic findings and conclusions (which were of relevance to multiple entities) of thematic evaluation reports.

15. United Nations stakeholders and Member States also offered suggestions for future thematic evaluations to make them more useful. They included making the reports more action-oriented, devising a stronger accountability framework for programme managers in responding to the reports, engaging in active consultation with departments to shape the scope of future evaluations and providing greater context in the reports with respect to the broader United Nations environment.

16. OIOS applied some of the lessons learned in its second thematic evaluation on knowledge management networks in pursuit of the goals of the Millennium Declaration. While the scope of the current evaluation was still relatively large, OIOS had focused on the issues of the greatest relevance and importance to the topic being reviewed and utilized a robust methodology incorporating both quantitative and qualitative methods. OIOS drew on relevant organizational initiatives and consulted with stakeholders throughout the evaluation in order to make the report more useful and relevant. During the evaluation, OIOS regularly consulted with staff from the Dag Hammarskjöld Library leading the secretariat knowledge sharing task force. OIOS also consulted with CEB, particularly in anticipation of the formation of a working group that would be assigned the task of developing a system-wide knowledge management strategy and framework (the OIOS evaluation was referenced in the terms of reference for this group as

providing a foundation for its work). Lastly, OIOS will also attempt to have the report discussed at forums of senior managers, as suggested by one stakeholder.

C. Interest in thematic evaluations

17. The interest of programme managers in the current thematic evaluation of knowledge management networks in pursuit of the goals of the Millennium Declaration is very high, given the timeliness and relevance of the topic discussed and the ability of OIOS, with its central evaluation function, to provide a Secretariat-wide and cross-cutting assessment of the topic. Many programmes are beginning to focus more attention on knowledge management and therefore have expressed great interest in the findings and recommendations contained in the report. OIOS noted that, given the nature and focus of the current thematic evaluation topic, a programme-specific in-depth evaluation could not have provided the comprehensive and Secretariat-wide assessment needed to determine how to strengthen the Organization as a knowledge-based and knowledge-sharing institution.

18. Overall, feedback regarding the future of thematic evaluations was very positive, with widespread support for OIOS continuing to conduct them. Responses from stakeholders and Member States on the user feedback survey indicated general support for thematic evaluations. Further, in responses to the OIOS Secretariat-wide survey for its biennial report on strengthening the role of evaluation findings in programme design, delivery and policy directives, respondents from nearly all programmes stated that OIOS should continue to conduct thematic evaluations in the future.

V. Conclusion

19. OIOS believes that the pilot thematic evaluation on the theme of "Linkages between headquarters and field activities: a review of best practices for poverty eradication in the framework of the Millennium Declaration" was successful in providing a sound and useful system-wide assessment of an issue of relevance and significance to the United Nations. Feedback on the evaluation was positive, with emphasis on its high quality, timeliness, unique focus on systemic issues and valuable institutional analysis of organizational coherence. While OIOS acknowledges the limitations to the report, it notes that no other evaluation office in the United Nations Secretariat is positioned to undertake an evaluation of such a cross-cutting nature. Assessments of coordination and harmonization are an integral part of an evaluation work plan that provides valid and reliable information to meet the needs of Member States and programme managers for objective and reliable evaluation evidence in strategic decision-making and programme enhancement. OIOS concludes that the experience of the pilot thematic evaluation was sufficiently positive to warrant the regular conduct of thematic evaluations in the future.

(*Signed*) Inga-Britt **Ahlenius**
Under-Secretary-General for Internal Oversight Services